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ABSTRACT

Compulsory schooling commences for children in New Zealand when they are 6 years old, but all primary schools accept children from the day of their fifth birthday. On any school day, a new pupil may enter the class for new entrants and become part of the school system. This article explores the creation of an appropriate environment for these new entrants, advocating child-centered learning activities in which demands of the national curriculum are balanced with attention to emotional needs and social development. The article begins with a brief description of New Zealand's "National Curriculum Framework" and points out the need for teacher competence in incorporating the needs of 5-year-olds into the design of their class program. It next discusses aspects of new entrants' transition to school, such as conforming to a schedule and relating to peers, and advises teachers to know each child's abilities individually in order to adapt curriculum standards to their developmental needs. The remainder of the article concerns the design of learning activities, suggesting that teachers remember variety in learning styles, promote independent activity, and create a stable, physically-conducive classroom environment. (EV)

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FORMAL SCHOOLING FOR 5 YEAR OLDS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Compulsory schooling commences for children in New Zealand when they are 6 years old. However, all primary schools accept children from the day of their fifth birthday. There are no set intake dates, on any school day, a new pupil may enter the class for new entrants and become part of the school system, which may last for the following 13 years of their life. An estimated 95 % of all children do make this early start. The challenge for teachers is to provide class programmes that are responsive to the needs of these children, in an environment that is conducive to their further successful learning.

While parents and caregivers have supported the learning of preschoolers, that which has occurred for them independently is also significant. Children are powerfully reinforced by their increased understanding of the world. The reward for the attainment of new skills, frequently involves increased autonomy which is praised by adults. First teachers in primary schools have an obligation to search for activities which extend the learner but do not require an excessive reliance on adults.

New Zealand is a small country of approximately 3 million people. It is geographically and increasingly ethnically diverse. English is the first language of schooling, although in recent years the status of Maori, the language of indigenous New Zealanders has increased to become a compulsory element of the curriculum. The small population and ease of communication has made the concept of a national curriculum achievable. The advantage of such a document is that it ensures that children may move from school to school with reduced transition difficulties.

The "National Curriculum Framework" covers the 13 years of schooling and dictates all that is taught in New Zealand schools. Teachers are accountable to the Minister of Education through the Education Review Office, whose officers visit schools regularly. Evidence of programmes that reflect the document must be provided for their perusal, along with measures of pupil

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achievement against its objectives. It is supported by syllabus statements that cover each curriculum subject and detail expectations in relation to skills, knowledge and learning processes. The document outlines a set of principles and explains essential learning skills.

> "The principles give direction to the curriculum in New Zealand schools. They are based on the premises that the individual student is at the centre of all teaching and learning, and that the curriculum for all students will be of the highest quality. The principles affirm and reflect New Zealand's identity. They provide national direction while allowing for local discretion. All schools must ensure that the principles are embodied in their programmes."[1]

On examination the principles reveal a flexibility that is not readily detectable in some of the syllabus statements, which dictate objectives, and suggest learning and assessment activities. One of the key elements for teachers of 5 year olds focuses on the fact that teachers are to design programmes, which are appropriate to the learning needs of the children. As the achievement objectives and associated learning activities are divided into levels that may span 2 year periods, it is reasonable to expect that many of the examples provided, are more appropriate for children who have had 1 or 2 years of schooling.

This does not mean to imply, that competency would not be achieved by any of the children. Rather, it points to the necessity of the teacher understanding the curriculum and the terminology used in each specialist area. This is to allow the identification of possible indicators that demonstrate the understanding of key concepts, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

When consideration is given to the fact that 5 curriculum areas have been reviewed since 1993 with reviews of the others to follow, the enormity of the task for primary teachers, who work across all subjects, is appreciated.

A further principle which says that the document encourages the independence of learners must also be considered,

> "The school curriculum will foster the development of the knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes that will empower students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. It will provide students with satisfying and worthwhile experiences which will motivate them to continue learning through life."[2]

This indicates the importance of the first school experiences as being successful and positive. The schools that these 5 year olds enrol into vary in size from around 10 to 400 children. The larger schools are more common and favoured by the government as being more cost effective. Typically 5 year olds enter the first class where there are less than 20 pupils but the size of the school, the formality of the environment and the presence of firm routines make it a vastly different experience.

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1 "New Zealand Curriculum Framework" Ministry of Education, Wellington 1993.
2 "New Zealand Curriculum Framework" Ministry of Education, Wellington 1993.

Few people would dispute that in the past, these first months at school have been long remembered, although not always for the unconditional joy felt by the new entrant. The importance of recognising the stress related to the transition to school, and taking steps to reduce this, is now recognised. Pre-school visits to the classroom by the children and their parents, to familiarise themselves with the environment and the programme, are encouraged as a way to alleviate the fears of the unknown. On these occasions, they have the opportunity to meet the pupils and teachers. They may begin to establish some friendships, experience the routines, gather their stationery requirements all of which, help to confirm their sense of belonging.

It must be remembered that the 5 year old child, has not previously operated within a 6 hour day, regulated into times for work, play and food, determined by an inflexible arrangement of bell ringing. The issues for these children are quite different from any that they will face during the remainder of their education.

It is quite feasible that in starting on the fifth birthday, the new entrant may be the only new person in the school. Viewed in this way the child is seen to be very special. However, from a personal perspective the child may feel like the only person who does not know how to read, write, sing the class songs, or interpret the teacher's instructions.

Successful transition is most likely to occur, when procedures take into account such issues, and teachers acknowledge the extreme importance of socialization and adaptation to the new environment. The development of friendships is a delicate process, through which the 5 year olds must be guided and supported. Teachers must speak frequently with the children about relationships with peers, how to use their oral language skills, and the effect of their actions - a smile as opposed to a hit. They must model positive behaviours and reinforce the welcoming signals to be given to new children. The arrival of new children constantly causes the dynamics of the group to change. The situation must be carefully managed so that the existing class members are aware of their support role.

Being empowered to sort out conflict amicably is essential, as there is generally a higher ratio of children to adults and frequently they are confined to a smaller space than in their pre-schools. The children must feel comfortable and confident when dealing with their peers, and not always feel the need to instigate teacher intervention. As in the adult world, conciliation and resolution of difficulties requires a high level of communicative skill and this must be taught.

A further strong influence over the success of the transition process is the expectation of the new parents and children. Parents tend to view the school situation from the framework of their past experiences. For those who have unpleasant memories of school, bringing the 5 year old to begin, may cause a high level of anxiety which can easily be transmitted to the child. A welcoming environment in the classroom is essential. Teachers must ensure effective communication strategies are in place and this is particularly relevant for non-English speaking families. If the children are engaged in

independent work during the school visit time, the teacher can be free to speak with the visitors when required.

A recent sample of questions from parents indicated a strong interest in their children's welfare, emotionally and socially within the school context. The formation of friendships and confident usage of independent time in the playground were seen as priorities for parents. The children demonstrated that they also considered that friendships were important. They wanted to be able to go to classmates' houses after-school. Their comments about learning to read, say the alphabet, paint and draw, indicated that they are initially also concerned with the acquisition of academic skills.

It must be realised that the curriculum for pre-schools is quite different from that of schools. The "Draft Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Programmes in Early Childhood Services" is formatted in a manner that makes clear its intended priorities. There is no subdivision according to curricula, rather it is organised under the aims of well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. There is no evidence to suggest that the advent of a fifth birthday ought to change these priorities.

However, primary teachers must teach from the "National Curriculum Framework" and be able to provide evidence of teaching, learning and assessment across all areas of the curriculum. The achievement objectives published in each syllabus statement dictate the attainments to be met. These must be clearly understood by the teacher, in order that they can be divided into manageable steps, and the concept and process development carefully monitored. The teacher must determine what is reasonable to include for new entrant children, in each class, and the curriculum must be responsive to their needs.

Therefore, getting to know each child individually is crucial. Teachers must listen and observe activities across a range of experiences, to determine as much as they can about what the child expects and understands. Successful new learning is founded upon previous experiences. It is unacceptable to assume that all 5 year olds will require the same activities or is resources from which to work. Finding the skill and knowledge levels that represent appropriate challenges for each child is essential. Posing the right problem, or asking the searching question which captures their interest sufficiently, seems to be the obvious way by which to extend the learners.

The demands of assessment concern many teachers, who believe that time and energy expended in this area reduces that which is available for planning classroom activities. The data gathered about individual children really becomes the research base, from which teaching should occur. Efforts must be made to ensure that assessment practices fit naturally into the programme and reflect the range of ways in which children may demonstrate their competencies.

Information gained in this way then guides the content and delivery of the curriculum. While all areas must be addressed, obviously the content and style of delivery depends upon the needs and interests of the children. When introducing new topics the teacher must consider the range of learning styles

and the prior knowledge. Activities need to be provided allowing for learning that is teacher directed, independently explored, or discovered through group and individual work. There must be a careful plan of possible learning experiences to support the objectives but also opportunities for the assessment of gathering of information to dictate the next learning steps.

For example a study of Antarctica may yield many questions from the children regarding the creatures and plant life that exist there. When recorded, the questions may then form the basis of book research. Quite simply this means, some children will see pictures that they identify as giving the answers. Those new entrants for whom book experience is a natural part of their lives to date, find this to be an easy task. Children become enthusiastic about this method of gathering information. Practical activities, such as looking after an ice cube for as long as possible within the classroom, lead to problem solving and associated independent activity and discussion. The suggestion of attempting to grow seeds, in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator, as a simulation of the polar environment is a firm indication that 5 year olds understand about ways to learn.

It is not until the children, begin to make their own contribution to the planning, that the learning becomes most active. Being shown a variety of possible activities over some weeks, encourages the children to generalize their experiences and suggest suitable activities of their own. The essential element in promoting this type of pupil interest, is the teacher's response. Acceptance and promotion of these ideas is a powerful reinforcer, showing that this behaviour is valued by the teacher and peers.

The programme must offer many opportunities for the child to operate independently. Learning activities that require a complex set of instructions serve to undermine the confidence of the child. Given equipment, ideas and time the children will frequently experiment and investigate ways to gain new skills and information. Careful prompt questions lead to new ways of thinking and the extension of ideas.

While teacher texts and handbooks often refer to individualised teaching programmes, it is a more effective usage of time to consider individualized learning. Some teachers have struggled to provide each child with a different reading text. With so many books to work from it takes an excessive amount of teacher time. However, if 3 or 4 different texts only are used, perhaps 8 children in a group could read it together. Skilful teacher questioning and observation could ensure that the children are learning the things that they individually need. The range of teacher questions and comments would allow for children to have greater opportunities to learn.

As in mathematics one child in a group may be making sets of up to 10 items, while the teacher can be discussing with others which numbers come before or after 5 or 7. Knowing the children and the learning steps is the key to providing successful individualised learning opportunities. Observations about the behaviours and knowledge of individual children are recorded and frequently updated to demonstrate gained skills or understanding. Such

record keeping must be easily maintained by the teacher to ensure maximum usage and benefits to the children.

The programme must address each curriculum area but more importantly it must reflect the children. A school day needs to be varied interesting, without unnecessary surprises. Security is an important element. If each day contains the same timetable the new entrant begin to be able to predict what will happen. So long as the activities are non-threatening the child will look forward to them.

In recognition of their relatively short attention span, the concept of little and often should be acknowledged. Each day can contain a range of activities from across the curriculum, with a significant block being devoted to "free choice", the most valued activity. Anything that is disliked does not last for very long. Children who have been at school for as little as 6 weeks are able to set out equipment for their chosen tasks.

The classroom environment may be considered both physically and psychologically. The walls, tables and corners must reflect the interests of 5 year olds. There must be ample space to display their work or any artefacts, and treasures that they bring from home. Informative displays must be made to encourage the on-going pupil interest. All of these items are more meaningful if they involve consultation with the children.

Teachers must resist focusing on the academic curriculum to the exclusion of the personal and social development of the children. The pressure of assessing measurable learning outcomes, from a curriculum that is designed to cover all schooling, must not be allowed to dominate the school experiences of new entrants. In adapting programmes to suit the needs of the children, teachers must consider all of the factors that are conducive to developing confident class members who feel a degree of ownership and responsibility for their learning.